

# **-hóhta'hané: Mapping Genocide & Restorative Justice in Native America**

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**Abstract:** This thesis explores critical decolonial cartography as a possible language for communicating and better understanding complex, intergenerational experiences of genocide and colonialism among Native American peoples. Utilizing a self-reflexive methodology, this work makes interventions in Native American and indigenous studies, comparative genocide studies, historiography, and geography to argue for more expansive languages with which to grapple with Native experiences of genocide. In so doing, this paper also asserts the need for indigenous narrative self-determination, development of decolonial epistemologies and praxes on genocide, and languages for violence that are specifically designed to facilitate dialogue on healing. For that reason, this work not only positions cartography and maps as a particularly useful language for understanding indigenous experiences of genocide, but documents the development of this language, with the intent of supporting and guiding others in creating alternative languages that best fit their nation, community, family, and selves. Finally, the larger aim of this work is to make the case for languages on genocide that heal, rather than re-traumatize, and give a more holistic understanding of the ways in which genocide 'takes place' spatially and temporally, with the hope of creating a larger, more inclusive, less violent space for imagining and crafting restorative justice.

**Keywords:** cartography, United States, Native American, colonialism, indigenous, decolonization, genocide, restorative justice, maps

## **1. Introduction**

In the Cheyenne language, the verb "to tell a story" (-hóhta'hané) can also mean "to testify." Indeed, that word is often used to refer to someone who is providing testimony in court, and the Cheyenne word for "courthouse" directly translates to "story-house."

We must bear witness and account for the violence sustained by our peoples, nations, communities, families, and selves in languages that honor the ways genocide and colonialism have been felt through multiple temporal and spatial scales. To give testimony is to tell a story—what kind of stories would we tell, what kind of testimony would we offer, if we could speak freely? Outside colonizer languages and expectations, using whatever medium worked best for our culture, our communities, our nation, our spirits? The power of those stories would be so immense, it could mobilize us (and the settlers we so often share our communities and lands with) towards a new kind of liberatory and restorative justice. As people who work with PTSD patients remind us, trauma does not have to be a permanent diagnosis. But indigenous peoples and settlers will only be able to achieve peace and justice when we are able to collectively understand what has and continues to take place, in its entirety. We can name the wounds, we can heal them, and we can let go and live free of the trauma and pain, but only after some very real, open, and painful conversation.

My aim here is to share one language with which we can start these conversations. I do not pretend it would work for every community, nation, or individual—rather, what I am proposing is that there is an infinite number of possible languages that could give a more holistic understanding of genocide. The language I share here is just one. I share it not only because I believe it could be effective for others, but also to illustrate my methodology in coming to this language, in hopes that it proves useful for others who embark on the path to healing and justice as well.

## 1.1 The Language: Maps

I believe that maps are particularly useful for communicating indigenous experiences of colonial violence and genocide for three reasons. The first is because they are widely accepted as an authoritative methodology by settlers and indigenous peoples alike. Like the testimony previously discussed, they are a method of storytelling that ‘makes sense’ to those who have not experienced the story. Because maps have been used as objective, scientific fact for hundreds of years (of course they never actually were either), maps carry a weight and an authority that other forms of storytelling do not.<sup>1</sup> This is useful in communicating ongoing experiences of genocide, especially to the very large portion of settlers that deny or minimize Native experiences of genocide, and the even larger population that remain ignorant to the realities that Native peoples continue to survive.

Secondly, unlike legal testimony, maps have much more room for interpretation, alternative narratives, and complex understandings of space and time.<sup>2</sup> So in that way, they have the capacity to tell stories that not only ‘make sense’ to those who have not experienced the story, but also to give a more holistic story that can be healing in its telling, for those that have experienced it. On just one piece of paper, we can map an infinite number of stories, experiences, histories, narratives, and all the ways they overlap, despite differing temporalities. Maps do not have to adhere to linear notions of time, or Western ideas of space and storytelling. For that reason, they have the power to be highly individualized to each person’s or community’s experiences and ways of understanding, which means meeting survivors of genocide on their own terms and allowing them to shape the narrative in a way that is useful for them. Moreover, this freedom of expression is made doubly powerful by maps’ ability to communicate coded language through the use of graphics methodology informed by cultural beliefs.

Finally, maps differ from any other form of storytelling in their ability to communicate and honor indigenous peoples’ relationships to land. A phrase that is often shared in Native communities is that violence against the land and violence against the people go hand in hand; because they depict human experiences and stories literally on the land, maps are particularly useful in honoring that relationship and frame of understanding. Our relationship to the land and land-based experiences is so strong, many Native people understand their tribal history, family trauma, and contemporary struggles in a larger context of physical and spiritual geography; maps are in a unique position to communicate our stories from that perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> Though personal testimony, anecdotal evidence, and creative works continue to be utilized as key primary sources in studies of colonialism and genocide, they remain confined to the realm of “the personal” in the eyes of most academics and policymakers. Conversely, statistical data is typically understood as more “objective,” but can be totally inaccessible to the very people who have experienced the violence, as well as the general public. These distinctions between “personal” and “objective” are imaginary and grounded in Western politics of respectability and knowledge production. Since their widespread use to facilitate violent colonization of the majority of the globe, maps have been afforded this privilege of authority via objectivity, due to both the standardization of use of Cartesian demarcations of space and an aerial perspective, and the inherent authority the white male cartographers of the last five centuries held. What this false dichotomy of personal/objective does not recognize is the data cartographers have been mapping *is* a creative work, and a product of their own perspectives. Despite that, maps continue to be afforded a high level of authority, even though they may (and often do) depict the same data more “personal” accounts do.

<sup>2</sup> It is generally assumed that maps *must* utilize not only Western linear notions of time, but a Western “clock” on trauma, ancestral knowledge and identity, and historical connection. This is the same clock that allows white Americans to confidently command Black Americans to “just get over” slavery, despite all the ways the US remains structured by its legacy. It is a clock that tells those that benefit from colonial genocide if they just wait long enough, they can hit a magic reset button and the privilege they lord over others is no longer something they should feel guilty about or wield in efforts to dismantle inequality. It is a clock that demands that when we map Native experiences of colonialism, we map it in the past tense and decontextualize it from the state of Native nations today. We do *not* have to utilize this clock, and indeed should not. The Roman calendar is not a requirement in measuring progression of time, our peoples’ trauma does not have a convenient expiration date, and we do not have to translate our unique relationships to land, community, and intergenerational violence into a sterilized version of the truth that will be easier for white Americans to swallow. Maps, because they are a methodology of storytelling, and not necessarily as prescriptive with space and time as hegemonic colonial authorities would like us to believe, can be a liberatory mode of communication and bearing witness that allows us to depict those unique relationships.

## **1.2 The Methodology: Self-Reflexive Learning & Sharing**

The personal storytelling elements of this work are inspired by the many survivors that have stepped forward to share their experiences of genocide. Two women that stand out in that regard are Chanrithy Him (Cambodian), and Clemantine Wamariya (Rwandan). Him's memoir *When Broken Glass Floats* and Wamariya's piece "Everything is Yours, Everything is Not Yours" are beautiful examples of the power in personal storytelling, and the ways in which these kinds of narratives can give a much deeper understanding of how genocide 'takes place' (both in space and time) long after the military violence supposedly ends. Similarly, I draw on Chicana theorist Emma Pérez's work to better understand ways of developing personalized, gendered historiography that works outside the confines of Western methodologies. Both the maps I create and the narratives that accompany them story-tell histories from the space of a Pérez-inspired decolonial imaginary, that resists the imposed heteropatriarchy and colonial discourses on Native history by offering stories that honor voices most often pushed to the margins or silenced.

In this storytelling, I also take inspiration from Audre Lorde's memoir *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, which pioneered the concept of a biomythography, muddling the boundaries between what is 'real' to others and what is 'real' to Lorde in the telling of her life experiences. This is not to be dishonest or stretch the truth, it is to give myself and the other people's stories who are represented on these maps some safety. Sharing our stories can be painful, difficult, terrifying, and dangerous—by weaving together what others perceive to be objective reality and what we know to be our subjective truths, we are able to share these stories in ways that respect our self-drawn boundaries in the interest of emotional and physical safety.

Cambodian poet Monica Sok also draws inspiration from Lorde, in her work on her family's experiences of genocide. Sok devotes particular attention to the paralysis many survivors and descendants feel when attempting to grapple with their trauma, due to a combined lack of audience sensitivity and language that is healing, rather than traumatic; in her own words, "How do you go toward that suffering in your writing when it also leads you and others to trauma?...A big part of me is afraid of perpetuating the brutality through language, and repeating the narrative of a politically oppressive regime instead of subverting it." I deeply relate to the concerns Sok raises; how do we share the stories that must be told—for our own healing and wellbeing in addition to our anti-violence activism, without hurting ourselves, or others? Moving beyond oppressive discourse, and without empowering the very forces we write against? These are questions Sok grapples with throughout her piece, and that I attempt to answer here in this work.

## **2. The Maps**

In the extended version of this work, I delve into great detail on each of the maps included here, and indeed devote an entire chapter to each pair. Within the space allotted here, however, what I would like to do is identify and address the major interventions these maps make, and explain why they are important and how they were done. These interventions include prioritization of indigenous voices and stories, use of intergenerational narratives that break with Western notions of time and trauma, an insistence that when we map mass death and genocide we must also affirm indigenous survival and victories, and use of indigenous cultural aesthetics.

### **2.1 Prioritization of Indigenous Voices**

It should go without saying that when mapping indigenous peoples, experiences, histories, and lands, indigenous voices should be given priority, not just during the data collection stage, but throughout the entire process and directly on the maps themselves. To most indigenous people, this would seem quite basic, given that indigenous cultures tend to place a high value on protocol that honor varying ideas of who has the right and responsibility to speak (based on things like community roles and responsibilities, territorial affiliations, etc.)—those who have the knowledge and the accountability to the community, land, culture, and ancestors should be the ones to guide the work. However, centuries of exploitative work by colonizing forces, academics, and government agents excluded and silenced indigenous voices and

perspectives. These actions continue today, both in academia and government policy, despite today's resurgence in indigenous sovereignty. For this reason, a refusal to cite the work of white male anthropologists and historians, and an insistence on using indigenous sources instead, is a critical intervention in a long and continued system of domination and power imbalance.

Examples of this practice in the maps below can be found in Figures 11 and 12, which map indigenous experiences of genocide that a non-indigenous person would have little to no understanding of. Arguably, some of the forms of violence represented in Figure 11 are experiences we share with other communities of color, but lines like “rape city molestation rez/blind eye apple corruption” are very firmly rooted in contemporary experiences unique to indigenous communities. Moreover, Figure 12 is entirely made up of indigenous stories, and one indigenous voice in particular—my own. Centering in indigenous voices in these ways not only addresses the aforementioned power imbalance in work on indigenous peoples, but also yields a more holistic understanding of genocide and colonial violence, as survivors themselves see it.

## ***2.2 Intergenerational Narratives***

When we prioritize indigenous voices, we inevitably open up the scope of our data to intergenerational narratives. This is because as indigenous peoples, we maintain a strong connection to our ancestors, and understand that our lives today are shaped by the struggles they overcame, the practices and knowledge they passed down to us, and the violence they survived. Thus, when asked what their family's experience of genocide is, an indigenous person today might name a massacre from 150 years ago, their grandfather's experience in residential school, their auntie's forced sterilization at the hands of Indian Health Services, and their own lack of knowledge of their indigenous language all in the same list. This intergenerational perspective on genocide is crucial to understanding the full extent of how indigenous peoples have and continue to be affected by colonial violence, and disrupts Western hegemonic ideas of time and trauma—namely that experiences of genocide are bounded within a linear conception of time, and trauma from genocide has an expiration date, at which point any survivors and their descendants are expected to “get over it,” regardless of whether an attempt at justice or healing has been made.

Examples of such interventions that include intergenerational narratives are found in Figures 7 and 9. Both maps include data from a wide temporal range, in an attempt to communicate the reality of indigenous experiences of genocide. As indigenous people, we live in a landscape of violence and trauma—we understand our histories and personal experiences as part of an extended intergenerational narrative woven together. Thus, any map that attempts to grapple with these histories but does not honor intergenerational narratives cannot be seen as fully encompassing the landscapes of violence that indigenous people navigate today, much less a holistic understanding of the complexities of our past.

## ***2.3 Affirming Indigenous Life & Victories***

Prioritizing indigenous voices and a more fluid understanding of genocide's impact over time also means that we must acknowledge indigenous survival. Though the violence that indigenous peoples have faced has changed over time, colonial occupation, imperial and racial violence, and legacies of historical trauma continue to affect indigenous peoples to this day; it is an ethical imperative to assert this in work mapping indigenous peoples, lands, & issues. In making this assertion, however, we also remind those with little experience with indigenous peoples that we not only survived, but our resilience continues in the present tense. Contrary to history books written by colonizers and settlers, indigenous peoples have fought against the injustices that were perpetrated against us, and frequently win, albeit not in ways considered valid by the colonial system. Part of reversing the power imbalances addressed in Section 2.1 is rejecting colonial standards of what is historically meaningful, and honoring indigenous resistance, resilience, and victory.

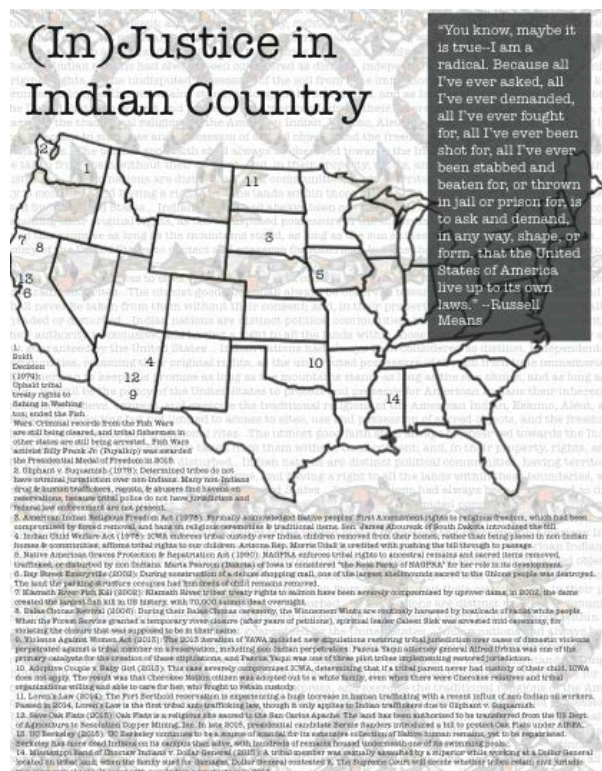
Examples of affirmation of indigenous life and victories are found in Figures 2 and 7. The map in Figure 2 was specifically designed to honor the legacies of those who have fought against the ways in which United States law has been used to perpetrate genocidal actions. These hard-won legal victories include the right to give proper burials to our dead, the right to our religious freedom, ceasing the theft of indigenous children by settler government agencies, and our treaty right to harvest traditional foods on

our home territories. Continued legal battles include the right to hold those who perpetrate violence against our people on our territories accountable, and the right to protect sacred religious sites. The map in Figure 7, in contrast, celebrates our ancestral military victories, including the Battle of the Greasy Grass (Little Bighorn), the Battle Where the Girl Saved Her Brother (Rosebud), and Red Cloud's War (the only war an indigenous leader ever won against the US military). What both of these maps have in common is a refusal to depict indigenous peoples solely as victims, and a determination to humanize indigenous stories of genocide beyond numbers of lodges burned, women and children massacred, and bands dislocated. This is with the ultimate aim of fighting a colonial narrative that says our ancestors were helpless, passive, and willing to accept mass death and destruction, and of honoring the traditions of resistance and resilience that continue among indigenous people today.

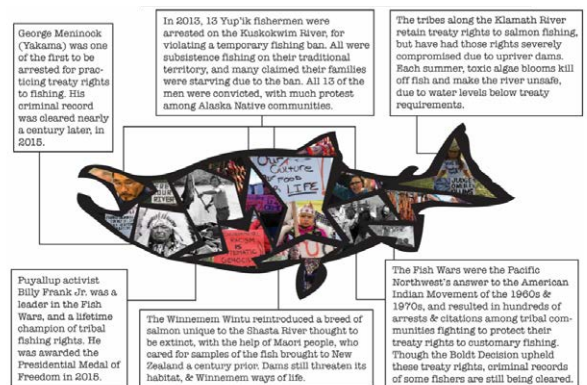
## ***2.4 Indigenous Cultural Aesthetics***

Lastly, I made the conscious choice to draw on indigenous cultural aesthetics and aesthetic praxis in each of these maps, because I feel that it is at best illogical, and at worst unethical, to map indigenous experiences and decontextualize them from indigenous cultures. Just as with any other ethnic group, our understandings of our history and the world around us are shaped by epistemologies grounded in our cultural beliefs—to attempt to divorce those stories from the cultural knowledges that shape them is to vastly reduce their meaning, legibility, and relevance to the very people who are represented on the map.

Examples of indigenous cultural aesthetics are found in each map in this work, though utilizing varying methods. For example, the maps in Figures 1 and 13 are literally mapped on the land itself—the background photo in Figure 1 is a photo I took of shared Cheyenne and Lakota homeland, and the overlay of photos in Figure 12 are screenshots of aerial photos from Google Earth, layered on top of a mosaic of cultural symbols and photos representative of the relationships depicted in the map. Meanwhile, the background to the map in Figure 7 (shown isolated in Figure 8) uses the star quilt, an item of cultural significance to Plains tribes, as a template for weaving together photos that represent the complex history the map documents. The star quilt design was also used to honor the idea we have of our homelands—like an heirloom quilt, they are passed down from one generation to the next, painstakingly cared for, and depended upon for physical, emotional, and spiritual survival.

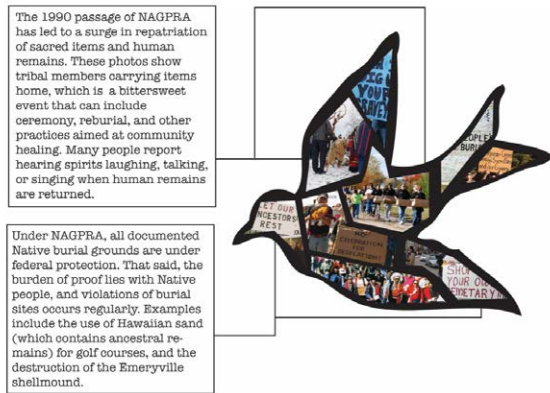


**Fig. 2.** *(In)Justice in Indian Country.*

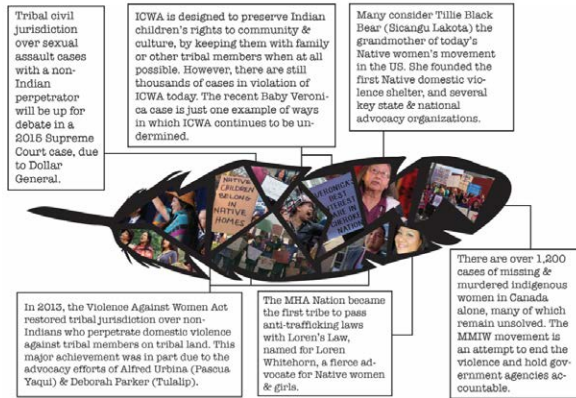


**Fig. 4.** Salmon design in *(In)Justice in Indian Country*.

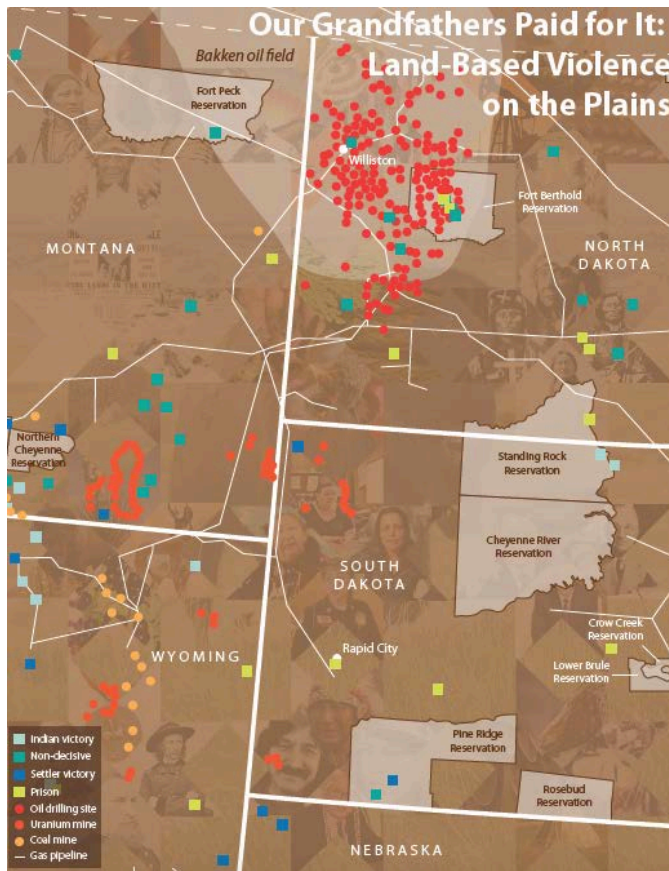




**Fig. 5.** Bird design in *(In)Justice in Indian Country*.



**Fig. 6.** Feather design in *(In)Justice in Indian Country*.



*Plains.*



**Fig. 7.** *Our Grandfathers Paid for It: Land-Based Violence on the Plains.*

**Fig. 8.** Background star quilt design for *Our Grandfathers Paid for It: Land-Based Violence on the Plains.*



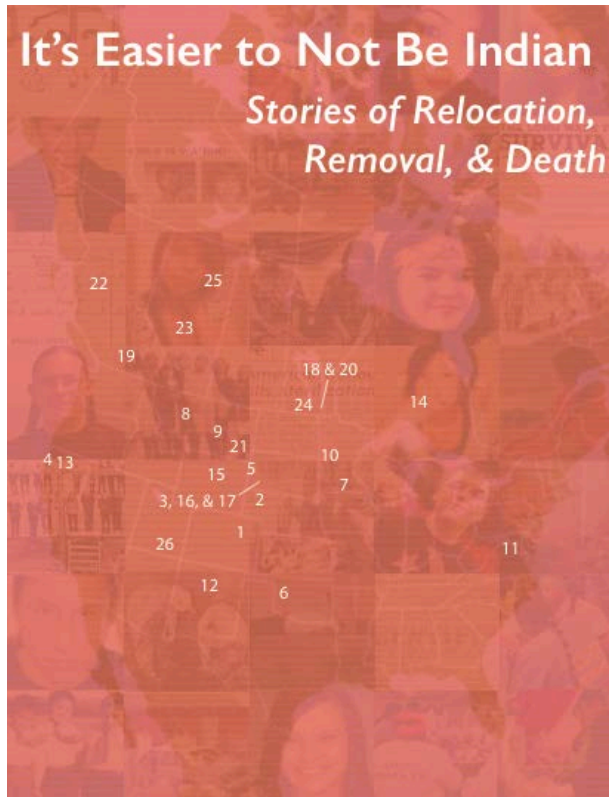


Fig. 9. *It's Easier to Not Be Indian: Stories of Relocation, Removal, & Death.*

Fig 10. Background images for *It's Easier to Not Be Indian: Stories of Relocation, Removal, & Death.*

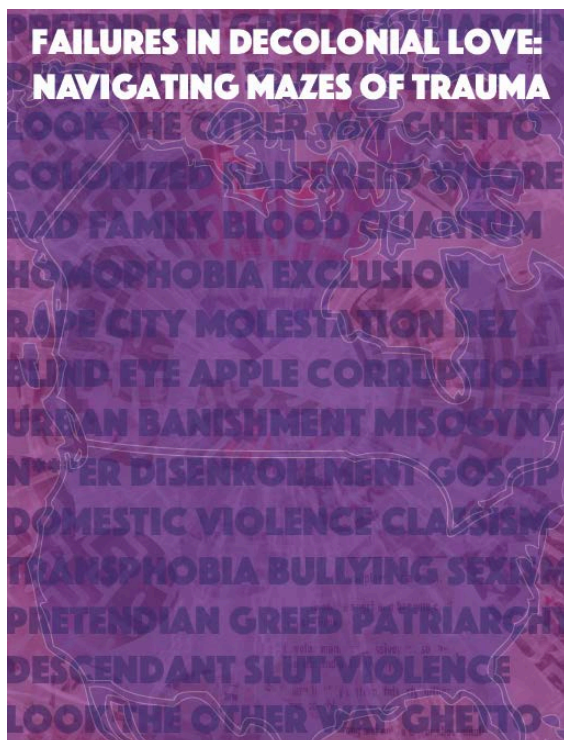


Fig. 11. *Failures in Decolonial Love: Navigating Mazes of Trauma.*

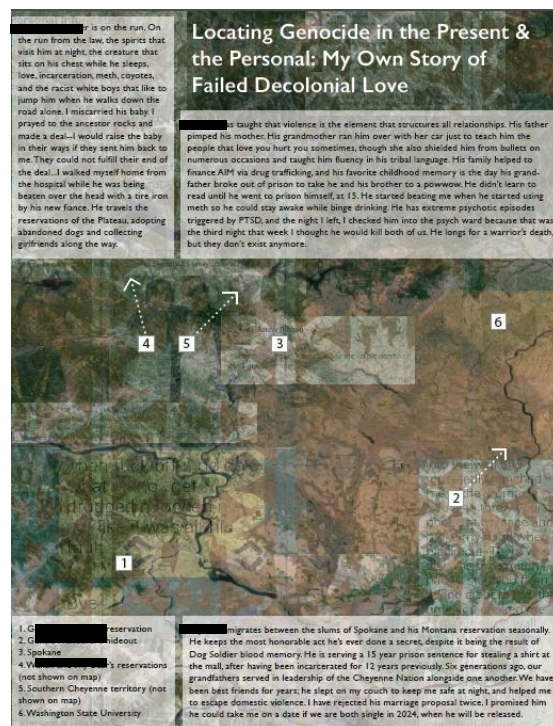


Fig. 12. *Locating Genocide in the Present & the Personal: My Own Story of Failed Decolonial Love.*



### 3. Conclusion

It is my hope that with all of these maps, I am not only offering a new way of understanding histories of colonial violence, but also highlighting ways in which that violence continues to be experienced by indigenous people today. Moreover, I believe these stories, though they represent immeasurable heartbreak and trauma, also represent a formidable will to survive and thrive despite the violence.

These maps are my medicine. They are my power and my truth, and the gifts that I give and have been given. I cannot and will not hold this damage in my throat anymore. Bite marks, cigarette burns, and scar tissue decorate skin draped over bones that didn't set right, an ear drum that will never again work right, a skull that grows hair thin and greying from stress, a cervix that cannot be examined without sedation. Ma'heo'o, nehpo'oeševahemeno—that is the prayer that I repeat to myself when faced with stories like Rocelyn Gabriel's, like W's, like my own. Roughly translated, it means "Creator, please release us from this trauma [PTSD/historic trauma.]" This work is another form of that prayer, offered up not only to Creator, but to Native people and to the people we share our lands with.

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